

Horror's new terrain

by [Chuck Kleinhans](#)

Horror film, while perennially popular, has gone through various changes over the past few decades. And the critical commentary on horror film expands as well. In the last issue of JUMP CUT (JC 49) we ran a group of articles on horror films. While the essays arrived independently, when published together they showed a new sophistication and complexity in discussing the genre and its political implications. Here we add four more essays, and the next issue will continue exploring this topic.

In JC 49 articles considering the horror genre ranged from Abel Ferrara's arty vampire film, *The Addiction*, to the commercially successful *The Ring*. The dark comedy of the *Ginger Snaps* trilogy and the *Resident Evil* series explored gender and sexuality through genre. We also looked at serial killer narratives as symptoms of white masculinity in crisis, and I analyzed the Hong Kong film *Dumplings* as a political allegory of transnational capitalism.

Reading popular "low" genres as political allegories is a familiar gesture. Susan Sontag's classic essay on post WW2 sci-fi films read them as expressing an "imagination of disaster" in an age that had experienced massive civilian casualties, the use of the atomic bomb, and a Cold War built on escalating anxiety. In the 1970s Robin Wood read a new resurgence of horror films as artistically representing the culturally and politically repressed of the decade between Vietnam and Reagan. Recently, critic David Edelstein dubbed a new tendency in horror, seen in films such as the *Saw* series, *Wolf Creek*, and *Hostel*, "torture porn," reflecting a post 9/11 and post-Abu-Grahib anxiety and sensibility. In her new book, *Pretend We're Dead: Capitalist Monsters in American Pop Culture*, Annalee Newitz argues that film and literature representations of serial killers, zombies, and cyborgs express the violence underpinning capitalism.

The articles we've gathered here, which will be followed by additional articles in our next issue, push the consideration of horror into some new areas. Chi-Yung Chin describes the creation of

“Asian Extreme” cinema in the past ten years as a deliberate marketing strategy and distribution arrangement that itself creates a sub-genre — and its consumers. By contrasting the U.K. and U.S. collections from Tartan DVD’s imports of Asian cinema, we can see that marketing discourse creates a genre, a meaningful grouping, which serves to stimulate fandom, and of course, commercial sales.

Nina K. Martin discusses the Japanese original of *Dark Water* as a film that embodies in the scene — the place, production design, the set, and the editing — the categorical breakdown of order, the loss of boundaries. Motherhood as an ideal in Japan has been under stress, as an economic boom deflated in the 1990s leaving actual mothers trying to meet impossible expectations while dealing with the realities of employment and rigid familial norms. Rather than a warm nostalgia for the past, horror represents the return of a buried history with a vengeance.

Marking a different way of appreciating horror, Jinhee Choi considers the tradition of sentimental art that conveys a moral message. In such expressions, aesthetic value is bound to the moral polarity represented and the formal play with the depicted norms and situations. The sentimental “naturally” embraces the extreme. With an unexpected comparison and contrast of Lars van Trier’s *Breaking the Waves* and *Dancer in the Dark* with Takashi Miike’s *Audition*, Choi considers sentimentality as a character trait and as a mode. As a mode, sentimentality can appear in a more familiar form in domestic and social melodrama, but also in an extreme phase of body horror.

In a far-ranging analysis, Gabrielle Murray begins by admitting her own appreciation of violent representations in film while seeking to avoid the gruesome depiction of body violence. But considering *Hostel II* in relation to Torture Porn, leads Murray to working through the affective nature of this new stage of horror. Using Eileen Scarry’s discussion of torture as allowing the mechanism of the process to deny the victim’s pain and suffering while asserting the torturer’s power, we can see the dramatic reversal in *Hostel II* as an ironic twist on the final girl scenario. In the now-classic Slasher subgenre, as described in Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, the final girl who defeats the slayer or monster, is the virgin, the innocent, the good girl. But for the U.S. globe trekkers of *Hostel II*, it is the rich girl, the trust fund gal, who can buy her way out and then turn the tables on the torturers, moving from victim to sadist. Because the heart of *Hostel II* involves the elaborate staging of torture, the performance space, the theatre of cruelty, it underlines the audience’s desire for intensity and fear, for a return to the body response to the filmic representation. The audience’s subjectivity changes, its body

response itself changes.

The new terrain of horror analysis has to include several key areas. One is the cross-cultural nature of contemporary horror. Entering the global cinema marketplace, older national and regional patterns of horror beg for a fuller, richer analysis both in their arrival as exotic cinema and in their domestication in English-language remakes. There's a connoisseurship of fan culture that can both embrace foreign novelty and continue a biased exoticizing due to viewers' fundamental ignorance of the import's original culture. A second concern involves a closer consideration of the emotional and ethical resonance of horror. Is the new direction of Torture Porn just another cyclic change or does it relate to deeper cultural and political anxieties? Since the gender analysis of horror has achieved such a major influence in the past two decades, how does gender work in this new development? And race, class, and nationality? And how does this work out in terms of horror as a body genre, a cinematic form that both depicts body in extreme states, and which affects audiences in terms of their own bodily emotions — fear, anxiety, shock, surprise, revulsion, sympathy, disgust. We will continue to investigate these issues.

[To top](#) [Print version](#) [JC 50](#) [Jump Cut home](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](#).